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ERICH VON STROHEIM, THE CHILD OF HIS OWN LOINS

Fanny Lignon

(Translated by Civan Gürel)

Even though [Erich von Stroheim](#) passed away 60 years ago, it is clear that his *persona* is still very much alive. His [silhouette](#) and his name are enough to evoke an emblematic figure that is at once Teutonic, aristocratic and military. No one has forgotten his timeless characters—among others, [Max von Mayerling](#) in *Sunset Boulevard*, a talented film director who has become the devoted servant of the almost-forgotten silent film star whose movies he used to make, or [von Rauffenstein](#), the prisoner of war camp commandant of *La Grande Illusion* with his neck stiff in a brace, perfectly symbolizing at once a world that is gradually passing away and a world that is being born. In the eyes of audiences, "the man you loved to hate", as he was known, has lost none of his appeal.

Alongside Griffith and Chaplin, Stroheim was also one of the most famous American silent film directors, who made such films as *Blind Husbands*, *The Devil's Pass Key*, *Foolish Wives*, *Merry-go-Round*, *Greed*, *The Merry Widow*, *The Wedding March*, *Queen Kelly* and *Walking Down Broadway*. He was a filmmaker who was profoundly attached to realism, voicing his hope that cinema may grow into a more mature art form; a filmmaker who was an artist of excess, who was extravagant and flamboyant and whose nine films changed cinema forever despite having only come down to us in a fragmentary condition; a filmmaker reputed to be a loose cannon who, according to legend, was broken by the Hollywood system. He was the archetype of the accursed filmmaker, in other words.

The man was supposed to be the very personification of authenticity because he merely made films dealing with his own experiences and, as an actor, simply played his former self. However, he turned out to be at once a brilliant impostor and an immense artist who had worked hard to breathe life, one film at a time, into the fascinating character he had invented and who had fooled all and everyone until his last day.

In 1966, Denis Marion found out that Count Erich Hans Oswald Karl Maria Stroheim von Nordenwall was in fact the son of a humble Jewish hatter from Vienna and that his aristocratic particle was only a figment of his own imagination. Afterwards, other scholars stepped up to the plate and unearthed the academic and military parts of Stroheim's past. It turned out that he had been a young man more gifted for languages than for economics, whose dreams of becoming a dragoon were shattered because he was of the Jewish persuasion. Even if the reasons that made him emigrate to America in 1909 still remain poorly known, it is safe to assume that they were related to his rejection of the life that lay ahead of him and to the antisemitism that held sway in Vienna at the time.

In a filmed interview, Marcel Dalio – who had never made a secret of his own Jewishness - expressed, in rather blunt fashion, his point of view on the man he knew quite well, showing a remarkable understanding of the endless vacillations that, according to him, haunted Stroheim: "He knew that he was somebody. Because he played all the life (*sic*) to be somebody. He is his own creation. He is his own father and mother, and that's what he wanted. No friends, no wives, no mistresses: nothing! Stroheim—married to Stroheim, in love with Stroheim. But he paid the price..." For his part, the cinema historian Herman G. Weinberg praises the richness of the mosaic assembled by Stroheim: "I think it makes him [Stroheim] all the more fascinating...and I would be disappointed to learn that...he was, indeed, what he said he was." Altogether, the famous filmmaker seems to remain as elusive as the title character of *Citizen Kane*, his own person as well as his work being only enriched by the contradictions they are steeped in.

These contradictions were apparent in the 1921 film, *Foolish Wives*. The film takes place in Monaco and has falsehood as its central theme. A bogus Russian count and two equally bogus princesses deal in counterfeit money, cultivate duplicity and fake a whole range of sentiments. For the sake of realism, Stroheim chose to [recreate the Monte Carlo Casino](#) down to its minutest details.

On the opposite side of his directorial process, when he set about making *Greed*, his very next film, he hired non-professional performers, decided to shoot [entirely on location](#), in the very places in which the events depicted in the plot took place. Stroheim claimed that "life isn't something to be recreated but to be captured." A problematic that belongs to the private sphere can go way beyond the person of an artist to spread throughout his entire work.

Stroheim is not only a major figure of cinema worldwide. He is also the author of an oeuvre that contains extremely modern artistic problematics: lying and creating; the truth in art—that is as a construction. This also relates to the modern notion of self-image, the image one constructs of oneself for the benefit of others but also as a way of finding oneself, at the risk of getting lost in the process.

Featured Image credit: Erich von Stroheim and Mae Busch in *Foolish Wives*, 1922 publicity still. Universal, Public Domain via [Wikimedia Commons](#).



Image for body of piece:

Newspaper ad for the American film *Foolish Wives* (1922) with Erich von Stroheim, on page 5 of the April 1, 1922 *Duluth Herald*. Universal Film Manufacturing Company, Public Domain via [Wikimedia Commons](#).

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